

Five Kisses

by Lariope

Five kisses that Severus Snape has received on his birthday. Written for Severus_Short's Brief Birthday Celebration.

[one shot]

Chapter 1 of 1

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A/N: Thank you very much to Opal_Jade for brainstorming and betawork. I owe this one to you, my friend!

The first came just after midnight, and it was whiskey-sour and stubble-rough against his forehead, just a brush of lips and a gruff, "Off to bed with ye." It was the eve of Severus's sixth birthday, and he had fallen asleep waiting for his father, his cheek pressed against the scratchy fabric of their secondhand couch. He was groggy with the heavy sleep of childhood, but pleased. It seemed a good omen. Severus had dreamed of the year to come--at six he would be old enough to begin school; but the life he had led heretofore had given him no hint of what the year would bring, what wild and perilous power he would find inside his slim young body, nor what it might cost.

The second found him running, running beside Lily in a convoluted game of Aurors and Thieves they had cobbled together from his mother's whispered missives and their own Muggle ideas. The snow banks soaked his trousers, but the chill was dulled by the fact that Lily ran beside him, her cheeks flushed pink, and her breath coming in hard, staccato bursts. The shrubbery tore at his frozen skin as they pushed through; he could see Lily's treehouse--the safe house--up ahead, and the game seemed to have taken on a new kind of urgency between them. Later, he would think that their shared fantasy had been, perhaps, his first experience of Legilimency. "Sev, we'll never make it! They're right behind us," Lily cried, and he took her hand, intending to put on one final burst of speed. But instead, it was as if he had stepped onto invisible springs, and he found himself sailing up to meet the rough hewn wood, Lily's hand still clasped tightly in his own, her eyes wide and awestruck. Then the sudden icy press of her lips against his cheek, and Severus believed that he had known the single greatest moment of his life.

The third took place in Hogsmeade, where he had snuck out with a group of other seventh year Slytherins to celebrate: Narcissa Black, slim as a reed, with her expensive robes and eyes that never quite met his. She was five years his senior and less than a year from betrothal age. Perhaps, he thought, the rumors that he had heard linking her to Malfoy were not true, after all. Perhaps it was possible that not being Lily's choice did not mean that he would not be *anyone's* choice. Narcissa tasted of lipstick, and the way she had cornered him in the alley and pressed her mouth to his made him think of the dark, secret throat of a flower, and desire took him all at once. For it seemed she *was* desire; she was possibility and power in the dark, and if she wanted him, then it was possible that he had misjudged the world, that it had not, in fact, all been written down in ink.

Charity was the fourth and last. "It's not too late for mistletoe," she'd said softly, appearing in the doorway of the staffroom, where Severus had spent the evening marking papers. Had he stayed in his own rooms, Minerva would have driven him mad with her Flooing to check on him and her suggestions that he at least leave the castle for a decent meal. Charity's kiss was warm but somehow dry, and Severus imagined that he had at last grown old enough to dispense with the passions and senseless hopes that the young insist on loading such matters with. She was as kind as her name, quiet-natured and staid, and if he loved her mostly for letting him be, it is not to say that he did not love her as much as a man can who knows that the clock is ticking inexorably toward ignominy.

Four kisses, and it seemed, every one a promise, extracted from him before he could begin to know the terms.

In fact, he has lived up to none of them, none of their myriad expectations of son or hero, and if he is honest, he has often been disappointed in return. But here is one more face turned up to his, the light of the streetlamp grazing her cheekbones and making dark shadows of her lashes as they stand on the front steps of his home. Hermione is his colleague, and perhaps, his friend. She has insisted on seeing him to the door following the meal they've shared for his birthday, to do, as she says, things up right. Here are eyes half-closed, and lips slightly parted, and her hand warm on his sleeve. He is seized with a sudden and paralyzing fear.

He cannot even begin to imagine who this woman might want him to be, or all the inventive ways in which he might fail her and she him. But around his heart, bands of fear and great excitement begin to tighten in rhythmic bursts. He has died, has he not? And in doing so, has he not begun again? *Those are foolish thoughts*, Severus thinks, *only meant to deter you from doing what you know to be absolutely correct, which is to tell this woman that you have no idea where she might have come by the idea that you were interested in a dalliance...* And yet, closing his eyes, Severus summons a kind of ancient, child-like bravery, and finds it in himself to dare, a final time, to believe that perhaps this one will be different.